

Reviewers' Evaluation for Public Charter School Application

Wayfinder Academy

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A. Education Plan

A.1. Mission, Vision, Identification of targeted student population and the community the school hopes to serve

Strengths

- The application presents a well-developed and articulated mission and vision with a clear understanding of the needs of at-risk and pregnant/parenting students.

Questions, Concerns

- The current model (mission and vision) has very specific student populations (poverty, insecure housing, homeless/pregnant or parenting teen) as the identified targeted student population. The application does not really speak to the lottery/opening of this student population to all students when becoming a public charter school and how that may have an adverse effect on the school's ability to meet the expectations of its vision and mission if the population of students alters from the existing population.

A.2. Academic Program

Strengths

- The program is very individualized and specifically tailored to at-risk and pregnant/parenting students.
- The program is well articulated and practiced, proficiency –based, aligned with the common core and meets the needs of its targeted population.
- The application presents a thorough presentation of curriculum and relevant instructional strategies in a student directed learning and goal setting.

Questions, Concerns

- The concern is how the very individualized – very specifically tailored academic program of Wayfinder Schools will transition into a public charter school with the requirements to document student attendance, progress, and growth in such a way to meet the state public charter school laws of reporting and accountability.
- The application presents little co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities in a traditional sense, especially in the Passages program.
- The school expects a lot from a small staff.

A.3. Special Student Populations

Strengths

- Individualized education in both Residential and Passages programs.
- Wayfinder Schools has experience with a high number of students with disabilities.
- Comprehensive approach
- Extensive behavioral and academic needs training for staff support of student populations.
- The individualized program historically used at Wayfinder Schools to be used at Wayfinder Academy addresses many needs.

Questions, Concerns

- The application shows a limited understanding of IEP meetings as well as a lack of evidence of a clear plan in the application to address how special education services will be provided and documented in both the Residential and Passages programs as per Maine Special Education laws.
- Staff certifications and qualifications do not appear to be appropriate for services that need to be provided for students with disabilities.

A.4. Assessment

Strengths

- Wayfinder Academy proposes to use multiple measures of assessment including Accuplacer, rubrics to evaluate proficiency, weekly teacher-student check-ins, portfolios, and Passages Projects to assess the progress of students in both the Residential and Passages programs which currently work for the unique purposes of Wayfinder Schools' students.
- Wayfinder Schools has a practiced plan for meeting graduation requirements that is specific to the nature of its students.

Questions, Concerns

- Public charter schools are required by state law to participate in state assessment programs. The application lacked clarity in addressing this area.
- Definitions of proficiency and how a diploma would be reached still need more defining.
- It is unclear how students can earn the credits necessary for graduation in 9 months.
- The proficiency "good enough" criteria on which work is judged is unclear.

A.5. School Climate and Discipline

Strengths

- A positive, personalized, and nurturing environment is critical to the success of the two programs and is evidenced by the multiple ways the application addresses the needs of students.
- Restorative Justice practices, Relational education, and staff trainings will guide the development of the discipline and school climate. The application shared policies from Wayfinder Schools that have guided the Wayfinder Academy Board policies.

Questions, Concerns

- Showing change and progress in this area will require documenting and a clear plan once Wayfinder Schools becomes Wayfinder Academy.

Education Plan Summary

Is the Education Plan compelling? Are we convinced that the applicant make a strong case for the

- Because these programs have been operational for years and have documented success with at-risk students, it has made a strong case for the quality of the program via a positive correlation of practice to student success.
- The Education Plan focused on the at-risk population and pregnant and parenting youth is compelling as it meets a need for youth who are not served as comprehensively in other public school settings.

Does the Education Plan support the vision and mission of the school? Describe why or why not.

- There is a strong vision and mission for a private Wayfinder Schools program. A concern is the plan for going forward as a public charter school, which must be open to all students, which wasn't evident in the application or during the application interview.
- The specificity of the mission and vision with regard to meeting the needs of at risk students, and its plan's documented success meeting those needs, provides sufficient evidence.

B. Organizational Plan

B.1. School Calendar and Daily Schedule

Strengths

- The applicant has a working schedule and calendar for both the Residential and Passages programs that purports to meet state requirements that aligns with its mission/vision.
- The residential program goes 24/7 for 9 months with behavioral and academic expectations covering equivalent hours.

Questions, Concerns

- It is unclear how the plan translates to meet state attendance/ and calendar laws.
- The Passages Program criteria for meeting equivalent instruction, which includes such activities as teacher-student time, appointments, online instruction, etc. is not detailed.

B.2. Student Recruitment and Enrollment

Strengths

- There are a large number of students who would meet criteria to attend both the Residential and Passages programs as currently defined by the Wayfinder Schools.
- Wayfinder Schools has strong relationships with area schools to refer/recommend students to Wayfinder Academy.
- Wayfinder Academy can base enrollment projections on the current population of Wayfinder Schools.
- Building on students attracted to Wayfinder Schools, Wayfinder Academy will hold open houses, visitations, brochures, mailers, web presence, word of mouth, use media, and community partners to recruit students.

Questions, Concerns

- At risk teens and pregnant/parenting teens won't be the only students enrolled at Wayfinder Academy. As per Maine Public Charter School law, enrollment at Wayfinder Academy will be open to all interested in applying, not just the at risk targeted population.
- It is unclear how the school will address truancy.
- Wayfinder Academy, in transitioning from Wayfinder Schools, will have to deal with Passages students who may be presently enrolled for multiple years but may not be chosen in a lottery in its opening year.

B.3. Staffing and Human Resources

Strengths

- Wayfinder Schools has been able to hire enough staff for its current student makeup. This should be a strength to draw from going forward.
- Wayfinder Academy identifies qualities/attributes they want the teachers to possess based on the target population of students.
- The application outlines extensive professional development for behavioral and academic needs.

Questions, Concerns

- The application does not address the need to change the current Wayfinder Schools staffing to meet the requirements of Maine laws.
- Will current staff of Wayfinder Schools have appropriate certification and/or expertise to meet State curriculum requirements as Wayfinder Academy?
- Wayfinder Academy needs to choose a teacher evaluation program approved by the DOE.
- The application lacked specificity regarding appropriate certification for Special education, school nurse, teachers for the Passages program.

B.4. Pre-Opening Plan

Strengths

- The board already has experience opening and running Wayfinder Schools.
- Staffing already exists; Wayfinder Schools is already operational.
- Standard pre-opening plan is presented in the application.

Questions, Concerns

- Adapting and adding the needed changes to a pre-opening plan for the transition to Wayfinder Academy and its unique pre-opening needs for the Residential and Passages program was not obvious in the application. A pre-opening plan for a public charter school needs numerous and different checklist items even when transitioning from a current school.

B.5. Management and Operation

Strengths

- Positions for the daily operation of the Wayfinder Academy are presented with an understanding of management needs.
- IRS form 1023 identifies Wayfinder School leasing land, make improvements, equipment, provide administrative services and financial support.

Questions, Concerns

- Managing and operating Wayfinder Academy as a separate independent public charter school will require different responsibilities than needed for a private school.
- Special attention should be given to special education oversight.
- It is unclear what remains of Wayfinder Schools vs. Wayfinder Academy.

B.6. Community Development

Strengths

- Wayfinder Schools has strong community support and successful fundraising.
- Wayfinder Academy proposes to actively engage parents through team building and planning and community engagement through utilizing community human and agency resources.
- Currently Wayfinder Schools works with Camden and New Gloucester school districts to help provide special education services for students.
- There is an extensive list of Community partners provided that work now with Wayfinder Schools.

Questions, Concerns

- Will the strong community support for Wayfinder Schools also be there for the broader student population of Wayfinder Academy?
- Need additional documentation of conversations held with the public.
- Upon becoming a public school will other school districts remain willing to provide special education services?

Organizational Plan Summary

Are we convinced that the school has an effective plan to recruit, retain and grow an outstanding staff? Describe why or why not.

- Wayfinder Academy outlined the attributes of necessary staff to meet student needs. Retaining staff through professional development, benefits, vacation allocation. Not identified are recruitment practices.

Does the Management and Operations Plan support the vision and mission of the school? Describe why or why not.

- The management and operations plan proposed in the application supports the vision and mission of the Wayfinder Schools – Will open enrollment of Wayfinder Academy jeopardize the vision and mission?
- The plan addresses how Wayfinder Schools has been organized as it currently operates; leaving adjustments to be made to become Wayfinder Academy - a public charter school.

C. Governance

C. 1. Governing Body

Strengths

- Some of the proposed board members have experience governing Wayfinder Schools and have been advocates of its programming.
- Proper documentation is included indicating that Wayfinder Academy is a nonprofit corporation.
- Monthly meetings and committee structures are outlined.

Questions, Concerns

- Need more information of how the Board will determine the success of Wayfinder Academy-school, leaders and the governing board itself.

C. 2. Governing Board Composition

Strengths

- The board is currently being formed, and has bi-laws and job descriptions available to use from Wayfinder Schools' governing structure. A few members will serve on both Wayfinder School Board and Wayfinder Academy Board. Due to the success of Wayfinder Schools, the Wayfinder Academy board should be successful in recruiting members with the required skills.
- Board members' resumes and bios show the will, capacity, credentials, and commitment to effectively govern the school.
- Diverse skill sets such as finance, restorative justice, education, health, psychology are represented by Board members.

Questions, Concerns

- The application didn't clearly outline the responsibilities of the Wayfinder Academy Board separate from the Wayfinder Schools board.
- Existing makeup of the Board includes members on both Wayfinder Schools and Wayfinder Academy. Appropriate percentages of cross over and the understanding that Wayfinder Academy must be an independent functioning entity must be pursued.

Governance Summary

Are we convinced that the Board members and Executive Leadership have the skills, background and understanding of their roles necessary to make this a viable and sustainable public charter

- Board members have diverse skills and backgrounds with the capacity to lead the organization as evidenced in their resumes, bios and statements.

Does the Governance Plan support the vision and mission of the school? Describe why or why not.

- Wayfinder Academy public charter school will need a board with different skill sets and knowledge of Maine Public school law in order to ensure the school meets all of the requirements of being a public charter school.
- The strong ties of the Wayfinder Schools board and the Wayfinder Academy board suggest that their experience governing the former will inform governance of the latter.
- There is concern that Board members have the evaluation plan needed to look at the components of the Residential and Passages programs to accurately evaluate the needs and success of the school.

D. Business and Financial Services

D. 1. Budget

Strengths

- Wayfinder Academy will benefit from the Wayfinder School “foundation” budget experience, fundraising success, and ability to make a monthly contribution to the Wayfinder Academy.
- The proven financial expertise that has supported Wayfinder School will be a tremendous asset to Wayfinder Academy.
- The Wayfinder Academy board will establish a Finance Committee for oversight, an Audit Committee, Independent Auditor, while Wayfinder Schools is to provide fiduciary administration.
- CFO of Wayfinder Schools is to report to the Wayfinder Academy Board.
- The application states that Wayfinder Schools will provide in-kind and financial support.

Questions, Concerns

- Wayfinder Academy will have a “dependence” on the Wayfinder School’s foundation monthly contribution needed to balance the budget and allow the school to operate in the same fashion as the current Wayfinder Schools, which will need to diminish over time.
- For an independent Wayfinder Academy, what will the contingency plan look like?

D.2. Financial Management

Strengths

- Wayfinder Schools based on past skill sets and knowledge will assist Wayfinder Academy for forecasting, accounting practices and reporting financial obligations.

Questions, Concerns

- The Wayfinder Academy application didn’t show itemized financial services from Wayfinder Schools. The application would have been stronger in this area if it had shown Wayfinder Academy with detailed financial requirements as if standing alone and starting from scratch vs. transitioning from an existing private Wayfinder Schools.
- Independence of Wayfinder Academy is a concern.

D. 3. Facilities

Strengths

- The facility already exists and is operational.
- The Wayfinder Academy Residential Program will be housed on the New Gloucester property through a lease with Wayfinder Schools. The Passages program has a Camden and UM Machias presence, but primarily the program is delivered at students' homes.

Questions, Concerns

- The application didn't spell out the specific facility needs of Wayfinder Academy as a public charter school residential program or the compliance with "public school" requirements.

D. 4. Transportation

Strengths

- The transportation method proposed in the application is based on the known model for the Wayfinder Schools Passages and Residential programs.
- The application says transportation for Wayfinder Academy will meet state and federal requirements.
- Generally transportation is not necessary as staff help with Passages student needs and the Residential students are transported by van. Transportation will be offered where lack thereof creates a barrier to program participation.

Questions, Concerns

- The application spoke to current transportation requirements for existing Wayfinder Schools Passages and Residential programs and lacked a specific discussion for the needs of Wayfinder Academy students if the format or structure of the day should change based upon a broader mix of students.
- Will becoming a public charter school affect the type of vehicle used by the school (ex; van requirements)?
- Lack of evidence of appropriate insurance, procedures, and meeting legal requirements for staff transporting students.

D.5. Insurance

Strengths

- The application mentioned that the Wayfinder Academy will purchase the appropriate insurance coverage through Clark Insurance based in Portland, Maine.
- The application addressed the commercial lease agreement: “Consistent with the commercial lease agreement, Wayfinder Academy will be named insured on Wayfinder Schools’ property, general liability, and business automobile policies.”

Questions, Concerns

- It becomes difficult to stand alone as Wayfinder Academy Public Charter School if too many things are linked to Wayfinder Schools.
- What is Wayfinder Academy’s share of surety bond for CFO (if any)?

D. 6. Food Service

Strengths

- Wayfinder Academy’s Residential program proposes a food service program.
- Wayfinder Academy’s Passages students food needs will be met in the students’ homes as needed with SNAP, TANF, food pantries.
- Residential program food needs are part of community living as they prepare, plan and eat together. A culinary instructor will work with students to plan nutritional meals.
- USDA lunch/breakfast program support is utilized.

Questions, Concerns

- As per the application: The Passages program at Wayfinder Schools has no food service program.

D. 7. Closure Protocol

Strengths

- A closure plan is provided.
- A transition team for staff, students and families will be established to create the plan, notification, record transition, and assist with educational options.

Questions, Concerns

- The very individual and student specific instruction for both Residential and Passages students could prove challenging when transitioning records in the event of school closure. Records will need to be clear in order for students to be properly placed in a new school.
- Lack of evidence of providing advice to Passages students who have limited options in the state of Maine in the event of closure.
- Lack of evidence of the school's plans and timelines for the orderly transitioning of students and student records to new schools.
- There was no evidence of means of appropriately disposing of school funds, property and assets.

Business and Financial Services Summary

Are we convinced that the applicant has operating capital adequate to open the school and for the first years of operation and have a viable sustainable model for the next five years?

Describe why or why not.

- Wayfinder Academy has the benefit of the history and funding capacity of Wayfinder Schools to provide in-kind and financial resources.

Does the Finance Plan support the vision and mission of the school? Describe why or why not.

- Given the historical knowledge of Wayfinder Schools the budget reflects the line items which support the types of programs that Wayfinder Academy will deliver in its mission and vision.

Application Summary

Are you convinced that this is a unique viable model that will meet the needs of the students it wishes to serve? Describe why or why not.

- It is a model that currently successfully serves very specific populations in need of unique programs. As public schools they will have to open enrollment to any student who applies, at risk or not. Students who simply wish to complete high school in one year will be able to attend the Residential program that is designed for students who have had their education interrupted for a variety of reasons. Students who wish to have an education provided in their homes who are not a young parent, or about to be, will be able to enroll in the passages program. The applicant believes the targeted populations will self-select. Perhaps, but even if 25% of the students enrolled are not in the target population, the ability to address the needs of the larger target population will be diminished, thereby diluting the schools' effectiveness. Unlike charter schools that are constructed around a specific curricular approach that tend to attract students/parents who wish that kind of approach, these schools are constructed around the express needs of a specific and limited type of student.

- Overall Assessment: Would you recommend this application for further consideration by the Commission?

Because the applicant has not shown sufficient evidence in the application or in oral presentation of creating a school that meets applicable state public school laws in the areas of special education, teacher certification, state assessment, and truancy/attendance the review team does not recommend the this application for further consideration by the Commission.

Recommendation:

Deny

Approve